

# NATURAL DISASTERS

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Growing up in Pensacola, Florida, I experienced hurricanes firsthand. Living in Dallas, Texas, I lived with the threat of tornadoes. I was sleeping within a few miles of the epicenter when the 1994 Northridge Earthquake hit Los Angeles. Every time I experience a natural disaster or hear of one, I think, “What does the Bible say about natural disasters?” It was not until Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005 that I decided to search the Scriptures on the subject. As a result, I preached the following sermon. It is about Katrina, but it applies to all natural disasters.

When a hurricane named Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast, it catapulted itself into the history books as the greatest natural disaster ever to hit the United States. For the first time in American history, a 22-foot-high wall of water crushed the Gulf Coast. For the first time, several cities were virtually destroyed. For the first time, a major city was evacuated.

Those who live in Southern California should pay particular attention to this subject. In August 2001, officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency held a meeting in which they discussed the three most likely catastrophes to strike the United States. “First on the list was a terrorist attack in New York. Second was a super-strength hurricane hitting New Orleans. Third was a major earthquake on the San Andreas fault” (*Los Angeles Times*, 9/8/2005, p. 1).

Natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, fires, and floods naturally produce a number of questions. On a personal level, a major automobile accident, losing your job, a heart attack, and cancer can provoke the same kinds of questions.

What is God’s part in a natural disaster? If there is an all-powerful God, why does He not stop it? Are natural disasters God’s judgment on sin? Was Katrina God’s judgment on the casinos in Mississippi and the French Quarter in New Orleans? Do natural disasters have spiritual significance? Is there something God wants us to learn from natural disasters?

## **Natural Disasters are Allowed by God**

“Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. And the LORD said to Satan, ‘From where do you come?’ So Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking back and forth on it.’ Then the LORD said to Satan, ‘Have you considered My servant Job, that *there is* none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?’ So Satan answered the LORD and said, ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’ Have You not made a hedge around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.’ But now, stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!’ And the LORD said to Satan, ‘Behold, all that he has *is* in your power; only do not lay a hand on his *person*.’ So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. Now there was a day when his sons and daughters *were*

eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house; and a messenger came to Job and said, 'The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them when the Sabians raided *them* and took them away; indeed they have killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!' While he *was* still speaking, another also came and said, 'The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants, and consumed them; and I alone have escaped to tell you!' While he *was* still speaking, another also came and said, 'The Chaldeans formed three bands, raided the camels and took them away, yes, and killed the servants with the edge of the sword; and I alone have escaped to tell you!' While he *was* still speaking, another also came and said, 'Your sons and daughters *were* eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house, and suddenly a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people, and they are dead; and I alone have escaped to tell you!' Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped" (Job 1:6-20).

From this story, notice several factors at play.

*The Sovereign* God had to give Satan permission to do what He did. As the supreme Sovereign of the universe, God is in control. Natural disasters are not outside of God's control. He does not wake up surprised at what happens.

I usually keep up with what's going on in the news, but in the days before Katrina's landing, I was busy and had not paid much attention to the news. I was vaguely aware that there was another hurricane stirring in the Caribbean that was headed toward Florida. Frankly, I didn't think much about it. I grew up in Pensacola, Florida and have been used to hurricanes all my life. The first time it dawned on me that this might be more serious was after the morning service on Sunday, August 28<sup>th</sup>. After I preached, I went to the fellowship hall for coffee time. A lady in my church named Christine asked me if I had heard about Katrina. When I told her, "No," she gave me some idea of how severe this hurricane might be. I remember how surprised I was. Katrina surprised me; Katrina did not surprise God.

The fact that God is in control and that natural disasters do not surprise Him is the very nature of the problem. What is God's part in a natural disaster? God allows disasters, but that is not the entire story.

*Sin* In this story, people and nature ("wind" in 1:19) caused destruction and death. There are *natural* disasters. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve sinned. Because of the Fall of Mankind, creation is under the curse of sin. For the first time, weeds grew in the garden. Since then, nature has been out of joint. In Romans, Paul says, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy *to be compared* with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:18-21).

Natural disasters are *natural* disasters; they are not acts of God. Natural disasters have no moral significance; they just happen. As Pastor Doug Giles wrote, "If you build a big city below sea level in the middle of hurricane highway then the chances are you're eventually going to take a hit. It doesn't mean God hates you. It just means there is a cost to living on the coast."

On November 1, 1755, an earthquake flattened the Portuguese city of Lisbon, killing thousands of its inhabitants. At the time, Lisbon brazenly called itself a party town. John Wesley attributed the earthquake to “the curse that was brought upon the earth by the original transgression of Adam and Eve.”

*Satan* In the case of Job, Satan was a factor. God gave Satan permission to bring calamity into Job’s life (Job 1:12). The point is that God is not the immediate cause of natural disasters. He allows them, but He is not the immediate cause of them. Sin and Satan are the immediate causes.

The point is that God did not originally create this sin/disease/death environment that we live in today. There was no disease, deformity, disaster, or death in the Garden of Eden—until man sinned. After the Fall, the world changed. What we live in today is a result of sin.

Let me put it another way. To eliminate the possibility of evil, the possibility of choice would also have to be eliminated. That would have made us robots or computers. Then our complaint would have been that God didn’t give us a choice; He just made us machines that He could manipulate. C. S. Lewis has said, “It seems that we are hard to please. We treat God as the policeman treats a man when he is arrested; whatever he does will be used in evidence against him” (Lewis, *Miracles*, p. 51).

The most common response to natural disasters is not the repudiation of faith but the reaffirmation of faith.

## **Natural Disasters Fall on All**

Are natural disasters God’s judgment on sin? Was Katrina God’s judgment on the casinos in Mississippi and the French Quarter in New Orleans?

*Not Just Sinners* “There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all *other* Galileans because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all *other* men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish’” (Lk. 13:1-5).

In Jesus’ day, people had an idea that you could tell the righteous from the wicked by the tragedy in their lives. According to this view, the innocent do not suffer. Wicked people suffer. Therefore, if there was suffering in your life, it was an indication that you were wicked. Jesus dispelled that idea. Just because they suffered a calamity did not mean that they were greater sinners than others were.

Sometimes the wicked prosper (Ps. 73). They grow the tallest corn and drive the latest chariots.

*Fall on All* Jesus said that God “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mt. 5:45). Blessings and tragedy are indiscriminate. They fall saints and sinners, believers and blasphemers.

## Natural Disasters Can Teach Us

“My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have *its* perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (Jas. 1:2-4). Trials are for our training.

1. Life is not about possessions. Life does not consist in the abundance of the things we possess (Lk. 12:15). Grieve the loss and learn a lesson.

“The pangs of death surrounded me, and the floods of ungodliness made me afraid. The sorrows of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried out to my God; He heard my voice from His temple, And my cry came before Him, *even* to His ears” (Ps. 18:4-6). “Trust in Him at all times, you people; Pour out your heart before Him; God *is* a refuge for us. Selah” (Ps. 62:8).

Learn a lesson. The greatest things in life aren't things! My guess is that there were cars rusting, submerged in New Orleans water from Katrina, with the bumper sticker: “*He who dies with the most toys wins.*”

2. Life is about relationships. Jesus told a Jewish religious leader, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is *the* first and great commandment. And *the* second *is* like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Mt. 22:37-39).

The most important thing in life is relationships. One lady who lost everything when Katrina hit and was trapped on her roof for days by the floodwaters said, “I had lots of time to think. I was not a religious person; I am now.”

One family lost everything but said, “We were lucky!” When asked, “Why?” they replied, “Because nobody died!”

Rick Warren said, “If you measure your life by the things you've accumulated (car, clothes, toys, possessions) and one day those things are all taken away, it forces you to reevaluate what life is really all about! If your definition of family is tied to your house or yard or neighborhood and suddenly it's completely destroyed, it forces you to re-think the true meaning of a family. If your concept of church is a building with stained glass and a steeple and it is instantly reduced to a heap of rubble, it forces you to realize that church is people, not a building.”

In the days ahead, millions of Gulf State residents and millions more watching them will ask the deepest questions: *Who is my family? What is a church? What is life all about? What on earth am I here for?*

3. Life is about helping others. James says, “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, *and* to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (Jas. 1:27). Life is about helping others, even when you need help. James begins his first chapter with you having a trial (Jas. 1:2) and ends it with you helping others in trouble (Jas. 1:27).

**Summary:** God allows natural disasters to come into the lives of the just and the unjust to teach us spiritual truth.

A daughter complained to her father about how hard things were for her. “As soon as I solve one problem,” she said, “another one comes up. I'm tired of struggling.”

Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen, where he filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to a boil. In one, he placed carrots, in the

second, eggs, and in the last, ground coffee beans. He let them sit and boil without saying a word.

The daughter impatiently waited, wondering what he was doing. After a while, he went over and turned off the burners. He fished out the carrots and placed them in a bowl. He pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. He poured the coffee into a bowl. Turning to her, he asked, “Darling, what do you see?”

“Carrots, eggs, and coffee,” she replied.

He brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. He then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. She smiled as she tasted its rich flavor.

She asked, “What does it mean, Father?” He explained that each of them had faced the same adversity—boiling water—but each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting, but after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak.

The egg was fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside hardened.

The ground coffee beans were unique, however. By being in the boiling water, they changed the water.

He asked his daughter, “When adversity knocks on your, will you be a carrot, an egg, or coffee?”